

# CHALLENGE AMERICA

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**FISCAL YEAR 2001  
FACTS AND FIGURES**  
Challenge America

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Dollar Amount of  
Fast Track Grants:  
\$3,205,000

Challenge America was a major new National Endowment for the Arts initiative, initially funded by Congress in FY 2001, to strengthen America's communities through the unique power of the arts. The legislation provided nearly \$7 million for arts education and public outreach activities. Within these broad categories, the NEA funded projects that focused on arts education and enrichment, after-school arts programs for youth, access to the arts for underserved communities, and community arts development initiatives.

Dollar Amount of  
Partnerships: \$2,793,840

Organizations and individuals from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—arts organizations and artists, state arts agencies, local arts groups, social service and civic organizations, businesses, teachers, and schools—were encouraged to strengthen and build innovative partnerships through this initiative. For 35 years, the Arts Endowment has helped build a network and infrastructure to place the creative vitality of art experiences at the center of community life for all Americans. Challenge America focused new resources to expand the reach and impact of NEA activities.

Dollar Amount of  
Leadership Initiatives:  
\$900,000

CHALLENGE AMERICA FUNDS WERE DISTRIBUTED IN THREE WAYS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF THE INITIATIVE:

- Fast Track Grants, in which the NEA awarded small grants of \$5,000 to \$10,000 under a streamlined application and review process to support arts projects that benefited rural or underserved communities.
- State Partnerships, in which the NEA invested 40 percent of Challenge America funds in ongoing partnerships with state arts agencies to support the initiative's goals.
- Leadership Initiatives, in which the NEA collaborated with other national organizations and federal agencies in new projects that strengthened communities through the arts.

## FAST TRACK GRANTS

Fast Track Grants in the first year of Challenge America fell into two categories: **Positive Alternatives for Youth and Community Arts Development**. These grants supported arts education and community-wide outreach projects that served rural and other underserved areas. Streamlined review and administrative processes brought projects to communities on an accelerated timetable. The small grants served the arts organizations in two ways: the NEA's involvement provided credibility to their projects with the local communities, and the grants worked as seed money for the projects to help organizations leverage additional funding from other public and private sources.



**Community Center for Youth team members worked with Whitman College students on “Wall of Words” mural at Walla Walla Public Library, led by Blue Mountain Arts Alliance head instructor Karen Johnson. Photo courtesy of Blue Mountain Arts Alliance**

### BLUE MOUNTAIN ARTS ALLIANCE EXPANDS ARTS PROGRAM IN WALLA WALLA, WASHINGTON

Since 1998, the Blue Mountain Arts Alliance of Walla Walla, Washington has operated a well-received artist-in-residence program at the local alternative learning school. In order to expand the program to the rest of the community, Blue Mountain assisted in the creation of a Community Center for Youth, where it provides arts classes and activities for the city's middle and high-school students. More than 200 people attended art classes through Blue Mountain's Summer Arts 2000 program, leading the arts organization to examine the possibility of expanding its operations.

In FY 2001, Blue Mountain received a \$5,000 Challenge America Positive Alternatives for Youth grant to help expand its programming in the visual, literary, and performing arts to encompass an entire year. In addition to the

Community Center for Youth, the Walla Walla Community College, City of Walla Walla, and Walla Walla Community Network were partners on the project.

Scheduled classes, led by local artists, were run during after-school hours on Mondays and Wednesdays and during selected evening hours at the Center. Because Blue Mountain was able to offer classes in multiple disciplines, the arts program appealed to a broad spectrum of young people. Students learned a variety of media, techniques, and styles in art forms such as painting, sculpture, and pottery from the artist-teachers, and created individual projects.

Local artists teaching the classes included Squire Broel, a visual artist who works in painting and sculpture; Nancy Wells, a dance instructor who organized the Walla Walla Dance Foundation in 1982; and Travis Catsull, a writer and assistant editor for *The Temple*, a quarterly publication of international poetry.

To ensure the program maintains its high quality, Blue Mountain has contracted an independent auditor to conduct an assessment, and regularly surveys the teens, parents, and instructors who participate.

## NEA ASSISTS WITH DESIGN OF NEW CULTURAL CENTER IN ST. MARYS, GEORGIA

The Camden Area Players (CAP), an award-winning performing group in St. Marys, Georgia and the only theater group in Camden County, is without a home. Currently, the theater group rehearses and performs in an old, rented hardware store, which the owner is trying to sell, and puts on approximately six shows annually for the community. In addition to its theatrical work, CAP leads a multidisciplinary fine arts camp for children ages 6 to 18 involving classroom instruction and hands-on experience at various skill levels.

The loss of CAP's current rehearsal and performance place would be catastrophic—the county would lose its only performing arts group, as well as the fine arts kids camp. As Louis Marcill of the St. Marys Downtown Merchants' Association stated, "We know that a community that includes arts in its foundation can build and grow with imagination, creativity, and humanity."

Partnering with the St. Marys Downtown Merchants' Association and the nonprofit development corporation Warehouse Theater, Inc., CAP received a Challenge America Community Arts Development grant of \$5,000 in FY 2001 to support the design plans for a new theater and cultural center in downtown St. Marys. The new theater is tied to the construction of a new waterfront park on the downtown bank of the St. Marys River that will include a 1,400-foot boardwalk, bike paths, kayak launching ramp, and two fish piers. The building chosen to house the new theater is an abandoned warehouse located on the grounds of what is to be the new waterfront park. In addition to being the home for CAP, the theater can host visiting performers and groups.

CAP selected consultants for the project with both engineering and theater experience to ensure that the design both fits in with the rest of the waterfront park design and is suitable for theater performances. The theater and cultural center is expected to be completed with the rest of the waterfront park in 2003.



**The abandoned warehouse on St. Marys waterfront that will house the new theater and cultural center and an artist's rendering of what the new theater will look like once renovations are completed. Images courtesy of Camden Area Players**

## STATE PARTNERSHIPS

State arts agencies received Challenge America funds in FY 2001 through their Partnership Agreement awards (see page 36). Funds are designated for new or ongoing projects that advance the goals of community arts development, arts education, cultural heritage/preservation, positive alternatives for youth, or access to the arts.

### MISSISSIPPI ARTS COMMISSION PROMOTES ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS THROUGHOUT STATE

The Mississippi Arts Commission used \$20,000 of its Challenge America State Partnership Agreement funds for the Deep South Literature for Literacy project. This project promotes Mississippi's rich literary heritage as a resource to improve literacy via a curriculum that uses creative writing and regional literature to increase language skills and performance in adult education. The project empowers families and communities weakened by low literacy by providing access to the literary arts and the tools for using them to increase their opportunities.

The Deep South Literature for Literacy project involved training Mississippi writers to work with adult literacy programs throughout the state. The training included indicating appropriate reading levels, teaching methodologies, and using Mississippi literature in the classroom. The residencies took place in spring 2002, and potential host sites that were not matched with a writer were encouraged to apply for funding to introduce writers into their program. Preliminary evaluation of the residency program has been very positive; there are plans to expand the number of writers trained and working in literacy programs and to develop partnerships with Mississippi colleges and universities.

In response to requests from literacy programs for support instructional materials, the Arts Commission also established a creative writing curriculum in 2001 called All Write! In partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education and the Governor's Office of Literacy, the curriculum was distributed to all the adult literacy programs in the state. All Write! is designed to increase language skill development, comfort with the process of writing, and GED essay scores. The writers-in-residence at the adult literacy programs use the curriculum as their teaching material.



**Writer Janice Nabors Raiteri works with adult literacy student Jayson Horton in West, Mississippi as part of the Mississippi Art Commission's Deep South Literature for Literacy project. Photo by Beth Batton**

## LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES

Challenge America Leadership Initiatives in FY 2001 included \$150,000 to the American Composers Forum for the continuation of Continental Harmony, a National Millennium Project started in FY 1999 that pairs communities across the country with composers for the creation of new works, and \$200,000 to Young Audiences for the Arts for Learning project, which provides information and resources to assist educators in integrating the arts into education curricula. The largest Leadership Initiative was for Creative Communities, a pilot project to provide arts instruction to youth living in public housing. The NEA contributed \$500,000 to the project, partnering with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, who provided \$3 million in funding, and the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts. Approximately 5,400 children and youth will take part in the 20 funded three-year programs nationwide.

### MERIT SCHOOL OF MUSIC PROVIDES AFTER-SCHOOL MUSIC INSTRUCTION FOR PUBLIC HOUSING YOUTH IN CHICAGO

Founded in 1979, the Merit School of Music in Chicago, Illinois held its first citywide auditions that year for 160 openings in its tuition-free Saturday afternoon music education program. Since then, the program has grown substantially, and thousands of students have received comprehensive music instruction in instrumental technique, history, theory, and ensemble playing. The Merit School focuses on economically disadvantaged children and youth, currently serving more than 4,000 students in 54 community centers throughout the city.

The Merit School received a Creative Communities grant of \$135,000 in FY 2001 to provide high quality, biweekly music instruction to children and youth residing in public housing developments in Chicago. Since 1990, the Merit School has been providing music instruction to public housing youth both on-site and in schools and community centers, and is expanding the program with the grant.

The after-school program was established in partnership with Duncan YMCA and the Chicago Housing Authority for children in the ABLA public housing community, and



Students from ABLA public housing in Chicago, Illinois participating in Merit School of Music's percussion instruction class led by Kalyan Pathak and Doug Brush. Photo by Amanda Huffer

complemented the YMCA's workshops in theater, dance, and film. ABLA is one of the oldest and largest public housing developments in the country.

The first semester of the program began in the fall 2001 at the YMCA community center in the heart of the ABLA housing development, offering six music classes each week for beginning instruction in choir, guitar, and percussion to the 80 registered students. The YMCA, ABLA residents, local advisory council members, and youth from the community organized focus groups to choose these specific music programs. The children in the classes have shown enthusiasm for the music instruction and are developing skill and discipline that will not only increase their appreciation for the arts but also help them succeed in life. A concert to showcase the students' work was scheduled for early 2002.